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WITH
LINCOLN
IN THE
WHITE HOUSE



REBECCA HARVEY SARAH HARVEY ISAAC HARVEY

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IN THE

WHITE HOUSE

ADAPTED FROM

NELLIE BLESSING-EYSTER'S STORY

BY HENRY W. WILBUR

PHILADELPHIA, PA.
1912



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FRIENDS WITH LINCOLN IN THE WHITE HOUSE.

During the Civil War there lived in Clinton County, Ohio, about fifty miles northwest of Cincinnati, Isaac and Sarah Harvey. They were of the conservative type of Friends of that generation. Isaac was a man often "moved" to do what seemed to his prudential neighbors, strange, if not foolish things, which made some of them call him the "crazy Quaker." But he was also a man who did not feel "easy" in his mind if his concerns could not be translated into conduct.

As the war proceeded, and the cause which produced it persisted, in

the summer of 1862 Isaac Harvey developed a compelling concern to visit Washington, and lay the burden of his mind upon the heart of the great President. In 1868 Nellie Blessing-Eyster visited the Harveys, and the story of her experience was first printed in *Harpers' Magazine* about 1874. In 1889 it was restated, and published in the *New Voice,* New York. The quotations in closer-spaced type are from this story, although we have taken the liberty of supplying the real names in place of the fictitious ones used by the author. We start the story with Nellie Blessing-Eyster's meeting with Isaac Harvey in the hallway of the Harvey home.

I crossed the threshold, when suddenly, from an armed chair just inside the door, there arose a tall, slender old man, who, leaning upon his cane, confronted me. His appearance would have been remarkable any where. His dress was of coarse but of spotless white linen, the only bit of color being a narrow black ribbon carelessly knotted under his broad, unstarched collar. His thin hair was white and fine as spun glass, a few locks falling over his high, unwrinkled forehead. His complexion was as fair as a girl's, and the facial expression intellectual and benignant. His eyes, however, were concealed by green goggles. Such a vision of majestic old age instantly arrested me. Nothing could have been more unexpected. He at once spoke.

"Thy footstep is that of a stranger; enter, for indeed thou art welcome," was his salutation.

Upon which I advanced a step or two, and laid my ungloved hand in his with a few words of greeting.

"Thy hand is that of a gentlewoman, and thy voice is low and pleasant. Be seated and tell me who thou art."

"I have come from the city of Harrisburg, in Pennsylvania, to visit my sister, Grace Harvey. I went with her to meeting this morning and was invited home to dinner by a lady whom my sister calls 'Aunt Sarah Harvey.' Do you know her?" I replied.

"Yes, I do." There was an instant's pause, when he said:

"Thou hast come, then, from the great world of which I know but little.

God—ever blessed be His holy name —has seen fit to take away my sight, but I have witnessed the coming of the Lord, and mine eyes have seen the salvation of a people, so I am content;" and clasping his long, well-shaped hands, his lips moved as if in prayer. My emotions were alive. They were those of awe, reverence, and admiration commingled. His articulation was unusually distinct, every word having a purity of finish which would have been marked in the diction of a professional elocutionist.

Surely this could not be Uncle Isaac, even though he was in a certain sense a "little queer." Before he again spoke Aunt Sarah, Rebecca and my sister entered.

"Thee got here first, I see," said Aunt Sarah. "Now, dear, thee must feel at home. Let me take thy hat.

We are plain people, but thee and Grace are truly welcome. Hast thou felt lonely this morning, father?" she asked, pushing aside the stray locks with which a breeze was toying, "and did thy poor eyes pain thee much?"

This, then, was the "crazy Quaker."

His smile was perfect, as he answered gently: "Oh, no, mother, I forgot my eyes." His words came to me very clearly: " 'For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory; while we look not at the things which are seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal.' I thank thee for bringing the young stranger home. I will enjoy her speech."

"I am the one to feel grateful, sir," I replied impulsively. "I have trav-

eled a great deal in my life, but never before been in a place like this. Everything charms me, and I am glad of the privilege to just sit still and hear you talk. May I not also call you 'Uncle Isaac?' "

"Yes, if it pleaseth thee; but thou must not flatter. There is no jewel like unto sincerity. Thy tones are earnest."

Aunt Sarah's kind heart was satisfied.

"I see thee can entertain each other," she said, "so I will get dinner. Grace, thee and daughter can help me." Uncle Isaac and I were left alone.

He broke the silence by asking: "Hast thou seen General Grant? Dost thou think him a good man? I long to hear his voice, and daily pray to God

to strengthen his hands and to make him worthy of the great work to which he has been called."

I said I knew him only as the soldier-statesman, but I felt that he, perhaps, more than any living American would perfect the grand schemes left unfinished by the death of Abraham Lincoln. At the mention of that name the old man's face glowed with a beauty almost divine. Every fiber in his body seemed animated with new life. Laying his hand lightly upon my shoulder, he asked in a voice of suppressed eagerness, "Hast thou seen Abraham Lincoln?"

"Yes," I said. "Once I stood so near him while he addressed a multitude that every line of his grand face was as visible to me as is yours. It was the last time that he spoke to a crowd as Abraham Lincoln, citizen,

for in a few days he took the oath of office as President of the United States. Once again I stood near him, but it was to look upon his coffined face as it lay in state in the Senate Chamber of Pennsylvania. Did you ever see him, sir?"

I asked the question mechanically, for, somehow, nothing seemed to me more unlikely.

"Ah, yes, yes; and a sadder face than his was then no one ever looked upon."

I was alive with curiosity, and exclaimed, "Why, Uncle Isaac! where was he, and under what circumstances? Please tell me."

"Perhaps thou wilt not sympathize with me. I rarely speak of these things save among my own people. In what light dost thou view the colored race?"

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The freeing of the slaves and the education of the freedmen had long been among my "enthusiasms," so, when called upon to "rehearse the articles of my belief," I did it so promptly that he could not doubt my sincerity.

Folding his thin hands, his face wearing an expression of sweet gravity, and his words coming slowly as if he was weighing the value of each, he said:

"I will answer thy question. My quiet life has known few storms. I have loved God as my first, best, and dearest friend, and He has ever dealt most tenderly with me.

"During the first years of the great rebellion, when I read and heard of the condition of the poor crushed negroes, I tried to think it was a cunning

device of bad men to create greater enmity between the North and the South; but when I read Lincoln's speeches, I thought so good and wise a man could not be deceived, and then I resolved to go and see for myself. At one of our First-day meetings I spoke of my intention, but although the brethren felt as I did upon the subject they said it was rash for me to expose my life, for I could do no good. Nevertheless I went, traveling on horseback through most of the Southland.

"Often my life was in danger from guerillas, but there was always an unseen arm between me and the actual foe, and in a few weeks I returned, saying the half had not been told of the sufferings of these poor, despised, yet God-fearing and God-trusting people."

Here his voice trembled with the overflow of pity of which his heart seemed the fountain.

"That summer," he continued, "I plowed and reaped and gathered in my harvest as usual. Day by day I prayed, at home and in the field, that God would show his delivering power as He had to the children of Israel. Nothing seemed to come in answer. Occasionally, during the beginning of the war, news reached us that battles had been fought by the Northern men and victories won, but still the poor colored people were not let go.

"One day while plowing I heard a voice, whether inside me or outside of me I know not, but I was awake. It said: 'Go thou and see the President.' I answered: 'Yea, Lord, Thy servant heareth.' And unhitching my plow, I went at once to the house and said

to mother: 'Wilt thou go with me to Washington to see the President?'

"'Who sends thee?' she asked.

"'The Lord,' I answered.

"'Where thou goest I will go,' said mother, and began to make ready.

"My friends called me crazed; some said that this trip would be more foolish than the first, and that I, who had never been to Washington and knew no one in it, could not gain access to the great President.

"The Lord knew I did not want to be foolhardy, but I had that on my mind which I must tell President Lincoln, and I had faith that He who feedeth the sparrows would direct me.

"We left here on the 17th of Ninth month, 1862, the first time mother had been fifty miles from home in sixty years. It was a pleasant morning. Before we left the house we prayed

that God would direct our wandering, or, if He saw best, direct us to return. Part of our journey was by stage. Every one looked at and spoke to us kindly. Oh, God's world is beautiful when we see the invisible in it.

"We got to Washington the next evening. It was about early candle light, and there was so much confusion at the depot and on the street that mother clung to my arm, saying: 'Oh, Isaac, we ought not to have come here! It looks like Babylon!'

" 'But the Lord will help if we have faith that we are doing His will,' I replied, and we walked away from the cars.

"Under a lamppost there stood a noble-looking man, reading a letter. I stepped before him and said: 'Good friend, wilt thou tell us where to find President Lincoln?'

"He looked us all over before he spoke. We were neat and clean, and soon his face got bright and smiling, and he asked us a few plain questions. I told him we were Friends from Ohio who had come all of these weary miles to say a few words with President Lincoln, because the Lord had sent us.

"He nodded his head and said, 'I understand.' Then he took us to a large house called Willard's Hotel, and up to a little room away from all the noise.

"'Stay here,' he said, 'and I will see when the President can admit you.'

"He was gone a long time, but meanwhile a young man brought us up a nice supper, which mother said was very hospitable in him, and when the gentleman returned he handed me

a slip of paper upon which was written: 'Admit the bearer to the chamber of the President at 9.30 o'clock tomorrow morning.' My heart was so full of gratitude that I could not express my thanksgiving in words. That night was as peaceful as those at home in the meadows.

"The next morning the kind gentleman came and conducted us to the house near by in which the President lived. Every one whom we met seemed to know our conductor and took off their hats to him. I was glad that he had so many friends. At the door of the big porch he left us, promising to return in an hour. 'You must make your talk with him brief,' he said. 'A big battle has just been fought at Antietam. The North is victorious, but at least 12,000 men have been killed or wounded, and the President,

like the rest of us, is in great trouble.'

"I did not speak. I could not. The room into which we were first shown was full of people, all waiting, we supposed, to see the President. 'Ah, Isaac, we shall not get near him today. See the anxious faces who come before us,' whispered mother.

" 'As God wills,' I said.

"It was a sad place to be in, truly. There were soldiers' wives and wounded soldiers sitting around the large room, and not a soul but from whom joy and peace seemed to have fled. Some were weeping; soldiers with clanking spurs and short swords were rapidly walking through the halls; men with newspapers in their hands were reading the news from the seat of war, and the President's house seemed the center of the world. I felt

what a solemn thing it must be to have so much power."

Here Uncle Isaac's voice got husky and tears fell from his eyes upon his wrinkled hands. I reverently brushed them off, and in a few minutes he continued:

"When the summons came for us to enter—it was in advance of the others—my knees smote together, and for an instant I tottered. 'Keep heart, Isaac,' mother whispered, and we went forward. I fear thou wilt think me vain if I tell what followed."

"No fear, Uncle Isaac. Pleace proceed."

"It seemed so wonderful that, for a moment I could not realize it. To think that such humble people as we were should be there in the actual presence of the greatest and best man in the world, and to be received by

him as kindly as if he was our own son, made me feel very strange. He shook hands with us and put his chair between us. Oh, how I honored the good man! But I said:

"'Wilt thou pardon me that I do not remove my hat?' Then he smiled, and his grave face lit up as he said, 'Certainly, I understand it all.' The dear, dear man"—and again Uncle Isaac stopped as though to revel, as a devout nun counts her beads, in the memory of that interview.

But I was impatient. "What then, sir?" The answer came with a solemnity indescribable. My curiosity and his reminiscence were not in harmony.

"Of that half hour it does not become me to speak. I will think of it gratefully throughout eternity. At last we had to go. The President took a hand of each of us in his, saying, 'I

thank you for this visit. May God bless you.' Was there ever greater condescension than that? Just then I asked him if he would object to writing just a line or two, certifying that I had fulfiilled my mission, so that I could show it to the council at home. He sat down to his table.

"Wilt thou open the drawer of that old secretary in the corner behind thee, and hand me a little box from therein?"

Up to this moment I had not noticed my surroundings. The old-fashioned furniture was oiled and rubbed, and a large secretary which belonged to the Colonial period was conspicuous. I obeyed instructions, and soon placed in the old man's now trembling fingers a small square tin box which was as bright as silver. Between two layers of cotton was a folded paper,

already yellow. The words were *verbatim* these:

"I take pleasure in asserting that I have had profitable intercourse with friend Isaac Harvey and his good wife, Sarah Harvey. May the Lord comfort them as they have sustained me. ABRAHAM LINCOLN.*

"Sept. 19, 1862."

"Uncle Isaac!" I exclaimed. "I can scarcely realize that away off here in the backwoods I should read such words traced by Mr. Lincoln's own hands. How singular!"

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*In a letter to H. W. W., Jesse Harvey, Isaac's son, thus accounts for this precious document: "We kept the writing given by A. Lincoln for years. It was borrowed some times, and finally was so soiled we concluded it would not be of interest to any one, and destroyed it with other old papers."

"Not more so than the whole event was to us, dear child, from the first to the last. The following Second-day the preliminary Proclamation of Emancipation was issued. Thank God! Thank God!"

It is not possible to depict the devout fervor of the old patriarch's thanksgiving.

"Our new friend was waiting at the outside door when we came out. I showed him the testimonial. He nodded his head affirmatively and said, 'It is well.'

"We soon left Washington, for our work was done and I longed for the quiet of home. Our friend took us to the omnibus which conveyed us to the cars, having treated us with a gracious hospitality which I can never forget. May the Lord care for him as he cared for us."

"Did you not learn his name?" I inquired, wondering what official in those days would have bestowed so much time and courtesy upon these unpretending folk.

"Yes, he is high in the esteem of men and they call him Salmon P. Chase."

"Truly," I thought, 'God exalteth the lowly, and they who trust in Him shall never be confounded."

In the published diary of Mr. Chase he describes the eventful Cabinet meeting prior to the announcement, Monday, September 22, 1862. The Sunday morning directly succeeding Uncle Isaac's visit Mr. Lincoln worked upon the Proclamation. God alone knows to what extent the President's long-desired step was influenced by that half-hour's visit with Uncle Isaac, but I cannot help feeling that I have read

a page in his history which would have been sealed but for my unexpected meeting with that precious old Quaker.

I have repeated our conversation, word for word, but I can no more express the timbre of Uncle Isaac's sympathetic tones than I can arrange in bars and notes the song of a soaring skylark.

We pass suddenly from the poetic diction of Nellie Blessing-Eyster, to the prosaic confirmatory facts underlying the story. There are two very reliable sources of information along this line, represented by the two surviving sons of Isaac and Sarah Harvey. The son Jesse lives on the old homestead, near Clarksville, Ohio.

The son William resides at Americus, Kansas. Jesse has no doubt that the story as told by Nellie Blessing-Eyster is substantially as she received it from his father.

We spent two days in the company of William Harvey, at Indiana Yearly Meeting in Eighth month last. He has many of the evident characteristics of his father, although he strongly resembles the mother's picture to be found as the frontispiece of this booklet.

From William we learn, as might have been expected, that his father was a pronounced antebellum abolitionist, and was connected with the underground railroad. William was living at home when Isaac and Sarah

made their visit to Washington, and remembers the details of the trip as it was told by his parents.

Isaac Harvey does not seem to have told Nellie Blessing-Eyster the subject matter of the concern which took him to the capital and the White House. William says that his father suggested to President Lincoln the advisability of stopping hostilities, on an agreement of the Government to pay to the owners $300 for each man, woman and child held in bondage in the country. The President felt sure that such a proposition would not be accepted by the leaders or the rank and file of the Confederacy.

Compensated emancipation, how-

ever, was not a new idea for President Lincoln. In Third month, 1862, he suggested that Congress pass a joint resolution providing that the United States co-operate with any State which may adopt gradual emancipation, to the extent of giving pecuniary aid to any commonwealth which should adopt this policy. This resolution passed both houses of Congress, but no practical result followed. It is well to remember that the original or preliminary draft of the Proclamation provided for the compensation of all loyal people, on the close of the rebellion, for all losses incurred by them, including the loss of slaves.

Whether the visit of Isaac and

Sarah Harvey helped to hasten the initial draft of the Emancipation Proclamation is a question which must always remain in the field of conjecture. But one thing is certain, there was a very sudden and rather remarkable change in the President's mind on the subject. This followed several events which came in rapid order. On the 19th of Eighth month, 1862, Horace Greeley issued his famous open letter to the President, entitled, "The Prayer of Twenty Millions." It was answered by the President on the 22d, in one of Lincoln's most terse and epigrammatic utterances. At that time he did not see that a vigorous emancipation policy on the part of the Pres-

ident would be wise or helpful. On the 13th of Ninth month a delegation from Protestant churches in Chicago visited the President, and vigorously urged him to take a pronounced stand for the overthrow of slavery. Still he was not convinced.

On the 19th, three days later, the Harveys were at the White House, and on the 22d the country was electrified by the preliminary draft of the Emancipation Proclamation being flashed over the wires.

Such was the order of events leading up to one of the epoch-making acts in human history. Remembering how responsive Lincoln was to the finer and deeper motives and emotions of the human heart, it is not hard to

believe that the visit of Isaac and Sarah Harvey came to the Great President as a sort of spiritual revelation, confirming the external events and internal leadings which caused President Lincoln to make the final decision in the case as he did and when he did.

In any event, the story as told by Nellie Blessing-Eyster is worth preserving for its portrayal of the light and leading of a Friend who represented the spirit of an older time, and also for its connection with Abraham Lincoln, now being considered the typical, if not the First American.

Copies of this booklet can be had for five cents each, post paid, by addressing Henry W. Wilbur, 140 North 15th Street, Philadelphia, Pa.